

THE VAN TWILLER DIAMONDS

CHAPTER III.

THE entire front width, on the second floor of the fine old Van Twiller mansion, recently having undergone a reconstruction, afforded one of the largest and finest ball-rooms in New-York. Three splendid apartments had been fashioned into one. Where two partitions once had stood there now were massive, mirrored columns against the wall, with a corner seat at the base of each on either side. An alcove, formerly designed for a small boudoir, supplied a retreat for the orchestra, behind a hedge of palms. There were four large doors in the room, two toward the southern and two toward the northern end, leading into smaller rooms and finally into the hall.

These latter apartments were filled with happy young people, gaily laughing and talking, as Wooster walked up the stairs and into the throng. Through the open windows the sounds of automobiles and carriages, constantly arriving, could be heard above the confusion and hum of heterogeneous conversations. A breath blew in from the outside world, and Wooster wished himself free from this contact with his kind—anywhere but here.

Half fearing to see her, half wishing that he might, Nelson glanced about for Aileen. Friends and acquaintances nodded to him everywhere, but Aileen was not among them.

That Major Van Twiller had followed up-stairs, Wooster was fully aware. His host was behind him even now, greeting his guests. Not only his own position, but that of the Major as well, bore upon Nelson with a sense of oppression he found most difficult to bear. The older man surely would watch him as he might a dangerous thief; he would burn with indignation whenever his daughter Aileen approached or touched him. The whole thing was sickening, especially as something of a show of festal spirits would have to be maintained.

To add to his utter discomfort, sounds of music now came faintly from the ball-room. Pairing swiftly and nodding and calling, the groups began to stir. For the first time in his life, Wooster stood reddening at the thought of the ordeal before him, making no move to head the gay procession of dancers. In fact, without Aileen, what could he do? he asked himself weakly.

But he saw her presently, white and nervous, coming toward him.

"We must do our best," she said in a voice that trembled. "It's dreadful—but—we'll have to pretend—if we can." She took his arm.

Like in a dream he led the way. "You heard it all?" he asked.

"I had to," she answered.

Then pair after pair of the dancers quickly sped toward them, smiling, calling their playful commands, and the game of pretense was assumed.

Out upon the glistening floor of the ball-room into the brilliance of all the light, the two distraught young leaders of the dance were walking presently. The march began.

To Wooster it seemed as if he felt nothing, heard nothing, saw nothing, except the look with which his host had confronted him so recently down in the study. Through the mazes and maneuvers of the beautiful cotillon he proceeded with mechanical skill and instinct. The little white hand on his arm was cold and nerveless; the girl at his side was silent and pale. Behind them, beside them, all

The synopsis of preceding chapters will be found at the end of this instalment on page 17

Love's Thorny Way to Happiness in an American Family

By

PHILIP VERRILL MIGHELS

Author of "The Ultimate Passion," "Bruvver Jim's Baby," "The Inevitable," Etc.

(Copyright, 1905, by P. V. Mighels. All rights reserved.)



Major Van Twiller Presented Wooster With Every Show of Courtesy

about them, the dancers thronged to the measure of the music. What a strange design it was these people were creating, with those men dotted regularly about, in their black-and-white similarity of evening attire, while women in every softness of color seemed smiling endlessly, their shoulders so creamy, their jewels flashing from every direction.

Wooster hated the jewels—that one thought was clear in his brain. Then his gaze fell on Mrs. Van Twiller, watching himself and Aileen from a place of vantage. She smiled at them fondly. But he saw, more particularly, first the baleful fire of the necklace of diamonds locked about her throat, then the stern gray eyes of Major Van Twiller, who stood behind and a little aside from his wife.

"I can't endure very much of this, Aileen!" he murmured. "Is there nothing you can do?"

She waited a moment, her hold on his arm tightening. "Nothing," she answered faintly. "Only—let's hope."

"It's horrible!" he said.

"I know—oh, I know! And—I can't let anything happen to you!" she told him, shivering a little as they walked. "and yet—if I broke my—Oh, I can't think, Nelson—not to-night!"

He gave her wrist a little pressure with his arm, and they said no more.

Through the various figures they continued abstractedly, wearing what masks of pleasure they could manage to assume, and at length the thing

was done. As a prisoner might seek out his jailer, to request relief from reprieve more painful than incarceration, Wooster sought out Major Van Twiller.

"I shall be obliged to you," he said, "if you can have some message sent to me, or something requiring my presence anywhere but here."

"Exactly," said his host, eying him narrowly; "but a promise has been exacted from me—quite against my will, I assure you, sir—to present you to Winnie—to Miss Fitzmorris."

Wooster reddened. "I would rather not," he said.

"She sees us now," replied the Major in a lowered voice, that could not, however, conceal his temper. "It will have to be done. By George, sir! this makes me angry! You know how I feel toward you—as a guest!"

A hot reply rose to Wooster's lips, but he merely bowed.

In the added humiliation which he felt the thing to be, the Major preceded the younger man, and led the way to a corner where a sweet-looking girl had turned to take her seat. He then presented Wooster with every show of courtesy. Inwardly cursing and disgusted, he made his excuses immediately and left the pair together.

"I have wished for sometime to meet you, Mr. Wooster," confessed Miss Fitzmorris frankly. "You are surely the 'Nelson' of whom Franklin—Mr. Van Twiller—so often speaks."

"Probably—yes, most likely," said Wooster. "We were college companions—chums, in fact."

"You are still very dear friends, are you not?" she asked, regarding him seriously from her big blue eyes.

"Yes, I think the world of Frank," answered Nelson, painfully conscious of the fact that he was making a stupid endeavor at conversation. "I thought he expected to be here to-night."

"Oh—did you?" she asked a little nervously. "I was so much in hope you could tell me why he left before anyone came—that it was that called him away."

"I should think Aileen or Mrs. Van Twiller could answer that question far better than anyone," he said.

"If they could, I shouldn't have annoyed you, Mr. Wooster," she told him in a way that revealed the sensitiveness of her nature.

"I am not in the least annoyed, Miss Fitzmorris," he hastened to assure her. "I only wish I could appear intelligent, or be of some help."

"I—I thought perhaps a man—a friend like yourself—might know so much more about him than Aileen or his mother," she stammered, flushing crimson as she spoke. "I have been a little worried all the week."

Despite himself Wooster elevated his brows a trifle. "Oh," said he.

"I—didn't mean—to say—just that," she faltered, her voice scarcely louder than a whisper. "You must think me—very forward. I thought perhaps Frank might have told you—we were secretly married, a week ago. I do wish you wouldn't tell!"

Nelson looked his astonishment, strive as he might to conceal it. "Old Frank!" he said. "But—excuse me, Mrs. Van Twiller—why in secret?"

She blushed again, to hear herself addressed by her secret name; but she looked in his eyes with all a sweet woman's honesty. "I—don't know," she answered. "Frank couldn't tell me why—just then, he said."

Nelson was silent for a moment. Then he